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## TEACHING THE USE OF THE COMMA

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It is unfortunate that rules, as such, ever have to be taught in the schools. Generally speaking, rules are the most abstract of directions for doing the simplest of things. Sweeping, for example, is a simple operation, and yet one could imagine the result of writing out explicit rules for holding the broom and passing it over the carpet, and giving them to a little girl to learn by heart, instead of putting a real broom in her hands and showing her the motions of sweeping. Rules, however, there have to be in any study, and the closer we make the connection between the rules for doing things and the actual doing of them, the easier we make it for the pupil to visualize each rule and see the reason for it. Especially is this true of the comma.

The proper use of punctuation, the comma in particular, is one of the first things to be taught in the high-school course, for if the pupil does not learn it at this stage he never learns it thoroughly, and his work is always characterized by a lack of readability and clearness, or by actual ambiguity. But the common method of teaching the comma is almost sure to produce in the pupil's mind the very confusion that ought to be cleared up. The standard rhetorics all contain a list of comma rules, varying from ten to twenty-five, all thrown together without apparent order or reason, and expressed in the "thou shalt" form that gives the impression of an immutable decalogue delivered from some pedagogical Sinai. "Take the rules for the comma for the next lesson," says the teacher, and Johnnie laps up the rules, with an example for each, which he may or may not understand. But in his composition that week he leaves a noun in apposition uncomma-ed with blissful unconcern, and when it returns to him blue-penciled, he guesses that a comma or two is needed and inserts them—but goes on leaving his nouns in apposition to roam at large. Now let us see if we cannot teach

Johnnie just what kind of an implement this little broom is, and how to hold it properly and make the dirt fly with it.

The first step is to be sure that the pupil coming up from the grades knows thoroughly—as he ought—the names and uses of the various parts of speech and of the various members of the sentence. For instance, he must know a participial modifier, know at once whether it is restrictive or merely parenthetical; he must know clearly the difference between a relative clause that restricts a noun or pronoun in the sentence and one merely thrown in for explanation; he must recognize an adverbial phrase or clause at sight, so that when he uses one out of its regular order he will set it off as naturally as he writes “c-a-t.” Without this knowledge he is merely learning sets of words without knowing just what they mean.

Next, he must come to see just what it is that the comma does in the sentence. A typical unpunctuated paragraph on the board will make him realize how colorless and hard to read our language would be without commas; how they are needed to *stand between* words or phrases to keep them from running together in a confused mass, and to *partition off* certain parts of the sentence to give them emphasis or show their relation to the rest of the sentence.

When this is once made clear, we have a good basis for classification: the comma is evidently used for two great purposes, to stand between, or *separate*, members of the sentence, and to *set off* other members. The distinction is seldom made in the texts, but it is important, for it will help the pupil to keep in mind that commas are needed at both ends of a parenthetical member. He must see that unless the member is at the beginning or the end of the sentence it takes *two* commas to set it off.

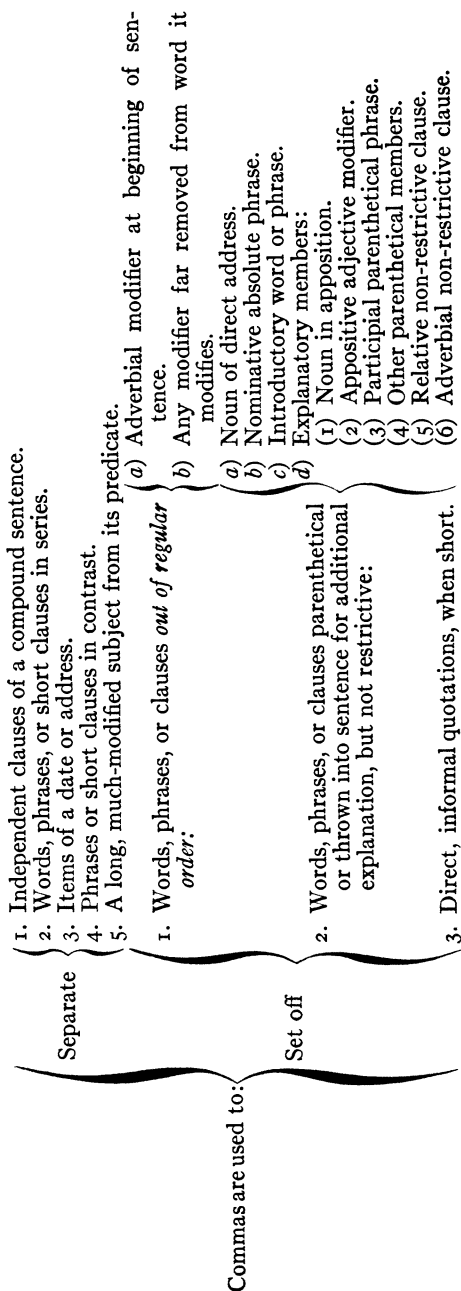
It now becomes fairly easy to get some semblance of order out of the chaos of comma rules, and to show just what service the comma performs in each case. The simplest separative use is between two halves of a compound sentence. Unless the sentence is very short, the comma is needed to show that the conjunction connects the two clauses, not the two words it happens to stand between. The next use that comes to mind is that between words or phrases in series, where the comma makes plain the idea of

separateness in the different members of the series. The third separative use is in addresses and date headings, where, it might be explained, the comma really stands for words omitted, an address or a date being merely a very much abbreviated sentence. For the sake of fulness might be added the comma between phrases or short clauses in contrast; and between a long subject and its predicate. These, however, are not necessary for the beginner and are better left until later, when they may be easily fitted into their places in the scheme. The writer has even omitted the address and date at this point, preferring to teach it later as a part of correct letter-form.

The "setting-off" use of the comma presents a few more complications when we come to analyze them, and several subdivisions have to be employed. To begin with, however, it should be emphasized repeatedly that practically all the "setting-off" uses fall into two main classes: setting off words, phrases, or clauses which are out of their regular order in the sentence; and setting off words, phrases, or clauses which are thrown into the sentence for clearness or explanation "by the way," but which have no direct grammatical relation to any other words in the sentence. If they are in there but do not belong there (grammatically), it is natural that they should be set apart in some way to show their disjunction. There is also the setting-off of the direct, informal quotation, but in order to keep the issue clear between the two main classes, that can be left till later.

The commonest member of the sentence found out of order is the adverbial phrase or clause at the beginning of the sentence. Aside from this, a member far removed in any way from the word it modifies is set off by commas to show that it does *not* modify the word next to it.

The "thrown-in" class of words, phrases, and clauses are variously termed independent, parenthetical, and non-restrictive, or explanatory, but whatever term is adopted, the idea must be kept uppermost in the mind of the pupil that the member is *thrown in* and so must be set off from the rest of the sentence to prevent our thinking that it modifies or restricts any word in the sentence. The simplest case of independent is the noun of direct address. Next might be placed the phrase containing a nominative absolute;



and the introductory word or phrase, like "however" or "in short," placed at or near the beginning of a sentence to make clear the transition from the previous sentence. And lastly comes the most important subclass of all—because its examples occur the most frequently: explanatory members, i.e., those thrown in for explanation, definition, or added information. The simplest would be the noun in apposition, together with the appositive adjective modifier, although the latter might well be omitted at this point. Next would follow the participial phrase used parenthetically, and with it the other parenthetical words, phrases, and short clauses, all thrown in for emphasis or explanation. Then would come the relative clause when used non-restrictively, the setting-off process being necessary here to show clearly that the clause does not modify the preceding noun or pronoun, a fact which the pupil must be made to see at all costs. Lastly might be added the adverbial clauses of time, reason, condition, concession, and result, when they do not restrict the preceding predicate. Here again the non-restrictive nature of the member must be kept clearly in view.

The above explanation may seem highly involved and technical, but it will not be found so in practice. As it is unfolded step by step for the pupil, not with the idea of teaching him a set of rules, but to show him the right thing to do when he meets with certain conditions in his writing, he comes to learn clearly for the first time just what his broom is and how he ought to sweep with it.

To put these ideas in the most graphic form and thereby fix them in the mind of the pupil, we may arrange them in the form of an outline, as shown on page 107.